

An innovative organizational planning initiative is giving rise to a new entity aimed at addressing institutional, structural, and equity issues impeding the full exchange and use of geographic information.

The result of months of deliberations among private and public sector geographic information professionals, the GeoData Alliance seeks over the next few months to offer a new means of addressing a range of seemingly intractable issues. Among the targets of their toils: equitable compensation for data development, maintenance and added value activities; and appropriate data use and privacy issues.

In the end, the group's shared vision is to foster more effective, more equitable flow of geographic or spatial data, and more widespread use in the interests of a sound economy, environmental well being, and public health generally.

The effort has involved two dozen geographic information systems professionals; including geodata providers and their customers; federal, state, and local government agencies; academia; and the nonprofit sector. Together, they have been meeting to fashion the kind of "bottom-up" self-organizing institution that can best meet the needs of the highly decentralized, unregulated, and widely diversified GIS community.

Their goal says one participant, is to foster process in which often-competing interests – the public and the private sectors, for instance, or even competitors in the marketplace – can hash out differences and seek common ground in a spirit of candor and equity.

Saying even incremental progress toward these goals would be preferable to the chaos some see characterizing this growing field, one GIS expert group listed its short-term ambitions as:

- helping to establish a trusted and inclusive process and venue for exchange of views and problem solving
- helping to provide a means of identifying common barriers to progress and seeking ways to remove them to encourage further collaboration; and
- avoiding wasteful duplication of efforts, expenses, and resources in making geographic or "spatial" data more useful to society generally.

Through extensive and detailed conversations, the group has arrived at a set of working principles and a statement of broad philosophy that will guide the new entity (See attachments for the exact wording of these principles and purpose statement as they stand at the conclusion of the group's most recent meeting in Denver, CO., July 12-14. Further refinements to these documents are still being considered.)

Just as the heart-felt discussions have surfaced some long-standing differences among the diverse parties in the planning discussions, they have aired also some basic tensions among local, regional, and national perspectives and, indeed, stresses separating those brought together by a common geography compared with those joined by an interest in a particular issue.

The parties in the GeoData Alliance deliberations appear to agree on the general outlines of the challenges they and their colleagues are facing:

- a need to increase widespread and equitable public access to spatial data;
- a need to create a venue, a setting, in which the quickly changing relationships of diverse GIS interests can be fostered and lead to productive partnerships;
- a need to better promote, educate, and “evangelize” on the potential of GIS;
- a need to promote the interoperability of GIS transactional systems;
- a need to develop model agreements and legislation –
- A need to foster collaboration in a way that avoids nettlesome antitrust and restraint of trade concerns.

After three days of intense discussions and considerations in Denver earlier this month, a GeoData Alliance “Drafting Team” agreed that a Legal entity (eg a not-for-profit corporation) was necessary to foster the purpose and principles, handle membership and finances, and support the national governance infrastructure. The smallest “grass roots” coordinating structure would be an interest alliance, with accommodation for community alliances and regional alliances, a national stewardship or leadership council would be established to address strategic positioning and planning and resource allocation issues.

The group is striving to assure that such a group of trustees or stewards have only the minimal authorities and powers absolutely essential to its being effective within a self-organizing “bottoms-up” membership group. They are trying also to ensure that the council is only so large as needed to ensure it adequately reflects the expected diverse membership—both from the standpoint of geographic and professional or interest-based perspectives.

From its initial establishment through its actual operations, the GeoData Alliance, would operate so as to earn trust for equitable decisionmaking, the drafting team insists, and it will reflect what one team member called a “barebones structure” consistent with the overall organizational design.

In detailing the broad designs for the new entity they envision, the GeoData drafting team members by turn outlined some of their foremost ambitions and anxieties concerning their undertaking.

Most agreed that the fruits of their labors must have real and demonstrable “value” consistent with real marketplace needs and directions. They expressed hope for productive connectivity (and therefore increased capacity) among those currently tilling the same fields but from different perspectives, and they envisioned the benefits of more frequent and more open “networking” among diverse GIS interests.

All seem to agree in the shared vision of having geodata or spatial information more readily available and useful to broad segments of society, and there was strong support also for creation of a GIS “knowledge network” based on a more uniform flow of geographic information.

Amid their hopes for the success of their planning efforts, drafting team members were candid too about their concerns should their labors prove unavailing. For one, they expressed concern that some or all sectors of the geodata community might already be too “entrenched” in their ways to be open to inevitable change. They worried about their own potential for “over-designing” the new entity, given the desire that it in fact be self-organizing at virtually every level. Some of the team members expressed the hope that their effort not be “ivory tower” and that it be in-synch with “commercial trajectories and commercial realities.”

Summing up the emerging consensus positions arrived at during their most recent meeting in Denver, the group agreed that it is moving toward establishment of a formal membership organization comprised of both individual and institutional members and of nonvoting general or “affiliate” members.

The group settled-on a single primary membership stream consisting of those premised on community, regional, multi-regional or interest-area foci. And it agreed on the strong desirability for diversity in interests and perspectives making up the group’s membership base, and also on fostering the ease with which members might partner among themselves.

As for the unofficially titled “national council,” the drafting team agreed they envision a trustworthy and inclusive group whose membership is fairly and openly selected through a voting process. They agreed on a commitment to “balance” geographic and sector interests, but not on precisely how that balance will be achieved in practice.

They agreed also to ensure that the council has only “minimal powers” until greater authority might eventually be bestowed by the membership at large. On this point, the drafting team focused on minimizing structure and authority as consistent with the overriding statements of purpose and principles.

They agreed that a National Council operating size of no more than 30 trustees would be desirable for ensuring effectiveness and productivity.

Additional details and information on the continuing deliberations of the GeoData Alliance drafting team are available on line at www.geoall.net. The drafting team is scheduled to meet formally one more time – in September – prior to announcing further plans for establishment of the new entity.